

St Andrews on The Terrace Pentecost 2 Sunday 16 June 2019 'Baptised in the Spirit' Baptism

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible

Psalm 103: 8-18

God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love, ⁹ and will not always accuse, nor harbour anger forever; ¹⁰ God does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is divine love; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far have our transgressions been removed from us. ¹³ As a parent has compassion on their children, so God has compassion; ¹⁴ knowing how we are formed, remembering that we are dust. ¹⁵ The life of mortals is like grass, we flourish like a flower of the field; ¹⁶ the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. ¹⁷ But from everlasting to everlasting divine love is with those who respect the divine, and righteousness with their children's children ¹⁸ with those who keep the covenant, obeying its precepts.

Gospel

The Little Children and Jesus

Mark 10: 13-16

¹³ People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

Contemporary Reading

Baptism: Thomas Keating

If you accept the belief that baptism incorporates us in the mystical body of Christ, into the divine DNA, then you might say that the Holy Spirit is present in each of us, and thus we have the capacity for the fullness of redemption, of transformation.

Reflection for the Gathering

Recently, someone said to me she didn't believe anymore in the God whom other people criticised and rejected as a contemporary rebellion against Christianity. I agreed. I find myself in the same position. There seems to be a set, immovable, immutable idea of God which has become the official party line of Christianity. Yet those who are practising Christianity all the time are moving and changing their idea and having different experiences of God every day. Whoever expected God to stay the same for centuries especially since the description of God comes from people who are always changing?

With small (and big) changes and developments every day, our ideas about God grow and develop like children do. Suddenly you look and see that the child is 5 cm taller than when last you looked, or their sweatshirt sleeves are really short, or suddenly, it seems, they have all their permanent teeth, or, even more unbelievably, they have developed good manners! Or it's like the internet. When I wasn't looking, someone developed the world wide web and smartphones; completely different ways of connecting with people and discovering information. I'm getting used to tradespeople asking me to send a picture of what I want fixed. I can send a text or email at any time. People will answer at any time too. Saves a lot of phone tag. Suddenly, there's a different way of watching movies and TV series. Suddenly, I can watch Formula 1 grand prix on my phone and not have to get out of bed to switch on the TV. (oops, that was my little secret!) In the same way, collective assumptions about God among practising followers of the Jesus Way are morphing, changing and re-shaping all the time.

Take the Spirit for example. When I was a kid, the Spirit was usually referred to as the Holy Ghost (which doesn't help a child to wrap one's head around the concept.) And, the Spirit was always 'he' which made the Spirit seem just as forbidding and intrusive as that old grey-haired God sitting on the judgment throne. (A view of God ditched now by most people in the church!) The medieval icon-makers weren't very good at drawing rushing wind and tongues of fire, so portraying the stunning events of Pentecost when the Spirit was reputed to have first come on the church were confusing and rather pathetic to a 20th century child's eye. Somewhat like a rather bad cartoon drawing.

Since then, I've learned a few things about words and grammar. As I said at the QMC centennial Gathering last week, the Spirit is described in Hebrew as *ruach* – a feminine word meaning wind or breath. So, the Spirit, she is like a cool breeze across my cheek or she might on some days be a rushing wind blowing me somewhere I wouldn't otherwise have gone. Or, the Spirit, she is the breath which moves constantly in and out of my body. No longer stuck in an icon or Bible picture book, she is as close to me as breathing. The ancient creation myths describe God as a sculptor, creating human beings from clay, then breathing life into us. So, at death, when we lay aside that clay body, all that is left is that breath – the same breath of God which has kept us alive and vital all our days. And, as one wise writer once said, why would God judge God's own breath? Think on that for a while – another different view of God. In fact, as the reading from the psalm reminded us, the Bible has *not* always presented a draconian, domineering view of God – people seem to have picked those pieces out and emphasised them and left these more loving ones fading into the background. Not that there are not problematic passages – there are heaps of them - but why not accentuate the positive? The problem with written accounts of God and God's action is that they always concretize God too much. The very idea of the divine or sacred is intangible, ephemeral, mystical, numinous. Once heavy words are applied in description, God is pinned down to imperfect human constructs which only can give one side at a time. We lose the multidimensional quality which is the character of anything holy or special. And this reflection will do the same – I am doomed before I start!

The phrase which came to me for the reflection title this week was “Baptised in the Spirit’. Let’s consider what that might mean without being too concrete or dogmatic about it. Our baptismal ceremonies are like words, they place ritual around something which is impossible to describe, something ineffable. Being baptised is a concrete act. The church, as it often does, has put rules around it about who can do it, who can receive it, what promises are required and when etc., etc. But where-ever the water goes, and on to whom, this act is an outward sign of something other which happens within the heart. That’s a subtle movement, a light breeze of numinosity, a breath of love. There are three ways in which Amos was baptised in the Spirit today, all of them delicate and difficult to describe.

The first way is a recognition that the breath of love which sustains this world, is moving in Amos today, has been since before he was born and will move in him in the future. It moved in him from before the beginning of his life, is keeping him vital and eager in the present, and it will fuel his psyche or spirit, for what is to come. Because we’re a little bit educated about sacred things in the church and know what to watch out for, we have taken notice of that movement of the Spirit within people and constructed a ceremony to mark it on one day, at a particular time and place. Today’s the day we mark that movement in Amos. The church uses water for this event because it’s a cleansing, purifying, healing entity. It flows and drips and soothes and immerses us; quenching all kinds of thirst including spiritual thirst. So, in here, at this font, there is an official, ecclesiastical recognition of the movement of the Spirit in Amos’ life and in his parents’ life – so subtle and loving we may not always notice it except on days like today when we encase it, we embody it, in a ceremony like this. It’s a bit like those movies where people become invisible. You can’t see them until you puff some smoke into the space where you think the invisible person is. The smoke shows them up, still ephemeral and delicate and yes even ghostly. So the baptismal ceremony shows us the Spirit and makes this subtle sacred numinosity a little more obvious to us.

Then, in second sense, Amos has been baptised into the spirit of this community. I have had disagreements about people’s view of why St Andrew’s on The Terrace is a community you might want to belong to. I say this community is a good community because it is a community of faith. For me, the wind of the spirit is gently moving between us all here – the long-time regular attenders and members, newcomers, those who have been here for a while, those who came some time ago and then left, those who are visitors. The Spirit, that moving, always changing, transforming she flows between us all, bonding us gently into one body. As a congregation we took our own vows today that we would welcome Amos, allowing him to teach us, as we teach him what we know of the Spirit. I hope we will work together so that part of the spirit of this place is a sense of justice and a willingness to act for the right things to happen in our city and society. I hope we will always recognise it is the boundless Love which the spirit brings that enables us to be loving and welcoming to all kinds of people even the ones who simply irritate us. This is no less a community of faith if it contains people who aren’t sure they have faith anymore, or that the faith they have is in tatters, or the faith they now have is completely different from the faith they held decades ago. Even the word ‘faith’ is problematic. We might think of now as ‘trust’ rather than belief in prescriptive creeds and doctrines. If the word faith is a problem, we could call this community one where you can trust the journey and the pilgrims on that journey; a community of trust.

There’s a third way in which Amos has been baptised in the Spirit, and it might be the most important one for him day by day. He’s been brought by his parents Emma and Donald. It is obvious to me that Amos as their son is already baptised in the spirit of their family. Couples may separate but families go on. Donald and Emma are making sure this family is a together entity, and that its spirit flows between them wherever they are. Theologically speaking, that was the role of the spirit at the cross. In traditional theology, when Jesus carried the weight of the darkness of the world, God could not look on that. (I have a problem with that assumption, but let’s follow this to the end). It was the role of the Spirit, say the trinitarian theologians, at that moment to hold God and Jesus together, to prevent a final and irrevocable ripping apart of the Godhead. You might like to ponder that idea. This understanding means we can all think of the Spirit holding us in our distress and also as she celebrates with us our joys, as she comforts us in sorrow, and sustains us in hope. Spirit is not only a noun or naming word, it is also a verb or doing word. The spirit within all New Zealand families needs always to be tended and held carefully; that is literally *spiritual* work, *spirit* filled labour. So Amos is baptised into the Spirit officially, baptised into the spirit of this community and he has been already baptised in the spirit of family.

In the Presbyterian tradition we only have two sacraments. Communion is one and baptism is the other. It is a high privilege for me to say to a child or adult “I baptise you”. In this hopefully ‘real’ and human sized ceremony today we align ourselves with the whole Christian movement, warts and all, through more than two millennia of time and throughout the world as we stop and allow the soft breeze of the Spirit to whispers Love to our hearts. We sang earlier about a ‘silent, holy night’. This baptism today and this Gathering is not so silent, but is a holy moment. In this moment we have been touched by the grace of Jesus, held by the Spirit and re-created again by the God who is the essence of the universe about us. Let us bathe in this moment as in the waters of baptism.